



Image of the profession

# Purging

The Greek doctrine that all diseases derive from a bad mix, or *dyskrasia*, of the 4 elemental body fluids survived unproved and unchallenged for 2000 years — longer than any other theory in medicine. In 1929 the Swedish hematologist Robin Fahraeus<sup>1</sup> speculated that it may have been based on clinical observation. Coagulation separates blood into 4 apparent components: serum, which we might consider the yellow bile of the humoral theory; a blackish layer

of densely packed red cells, possibly the black bile; a cake of fibrin, which could be the ancient mucus or phlegm; and a bright red liquid fraction containing intact erythrocytes and free hemoglobin — the blood proper. It stands to reason that the Greeks tried to rid the body of a harmful mix by letting blood and thus allowing a good mix, or *eukrasia*, to re-establish itself.

“Cleansing” through bloodletting and enemas remained popular from an-

tiquity into the 19th century, especially among physicians who treated royal bodies, since these measures constituted “classical” therapy and were less risky than administering medicines. Venesection was practised well into the 19th century for a great number of afflictions and, as Hippocrates prescribed, *ad animi deliquionem*, “until the failure of the spirit” — that is, until the patient swooned. Leeches were set on thrombophlebitic legs until the 1950s.

Molière ridiculed the medical profession in the last of his plays, *Le malade imaginaire*. The medical examiners grill a candidate, who always delivers the same mock-Latin answer: “*Chlysterium donare, postea seignare, ensuite purgare.*” He is always right.

Molière, who had long suffered from phthisis, or tuberculosis, started to cough blood and then collapsed during the fourth performance of his *Malade* on Feb. 17, 1673. He was 51 years old.

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### Reference

1. Fahraeus R. The suspension stability of the blood. *Physiol Rev* 1929;9:241-71.



— Eh bien, M<sup>r</sup> Argan, cette petite médecine a-t-elle réussi, oui ou non?  
— Mon Dieu, mon bon M<sup>r</sup> Purgon, je suis assez content du résultat, maintenant il faut attendre l'effet...

**Lithograph by Stop (L. Morel-Retz, 1825–1899). Reproduced with permission of Yale University, Cushing/Whitney Medical Library, Historical Library. The caption is based on Molière's *Le malade imaginaire*:**

— So, Mr. Argan, our little remedy: was it successful or not?  
— Well, my dear Mr. Purgon, I am quite happy with the result. Now it's a question of waiting for the effect ...

### Illness and metaphor

#### STILLBORN

who  
looped the cord  
around his fine new neck

who  
hanged him  
in my bone gallows my

beautiful son  
blue as the blue  
in Chinese porcelain

**Lorna Crozier**

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